

Transformationen von Wissen in der niederländischen Expansion / Transformations of Knowledge in Dutch Expansion

Veranstalter: Susanne Friedrich / Stefan Ehrenpreis, SFB 573 „Pluralisierung und Autorität in der Frühen Neuzeit“, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München

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On the 14th and 15th October 2010 an international conference on „Transformations of Knowledge in Dutch Expansion“ organized by Susanne Friedrich and Stefan Ehrenpreis in the context of the Research Centre on „Pluralization and Authority in the Early Modern Period“ took place at Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität in Munich.

In her introductory paper SUSANNE FRIEDRICH (Munich) presented the Dutch East and West India Companies, hybrid enterprises of trading and colonizing organizations, as actors seeking knowledge about the overseas territories in the process of Dutch expansion. They looked for information which aimed at being economically and logistically useful, which had to be empirical, up-to-date, plain and concentrated on the important. This type of information, however, probably neither met the definition of „knowledge“ as understood by the contemporaries nor our own. Therefore, a first question to deal with at the conference was on how the information obtained for the purposes of the companies was transferred to other areas of interest and transformed into knowledge. In addition to this „official“ information a lot more information accompanied the travels of the trading companies, which was never meant to be of immediate mercantile or strategic use. All kinds of objects as well as statements from or about the foreign regions informed the Europeans, although they were considerably transformed when passing from an indigenous culture to Europe. They were first de-contextualized from their original meaning to be afterwards re-contextualized in a completely new framework. With the alteration of structure, form

and use of the knowledge, the way was paved for it to be asked for by the European world and integrated into its system of knowledge. To discuss the mechanisms, strategies and argumentative figures which were used implicitly or explicitly to appropriately transform the knowledge was the principle aim of the conference.

BENJAMIN SCHMIDT (Washington/London) concentrated on knowledge transformation in visual media. In the final decades of the 17th and the first few decades of the 18th century material production providing knowledge about foreign countries encompassed a singular burst in Holland. Transformation of knowledge took place in conjunction with its commodification, and was aimed to satisfy a growing demand for exotica in all of Europe. Sketches were worked up in Amsterdam ateliers and integrated into prints or other objects. Schmidt was able to present the itineraries of pictorial motives from one object to the other by showing an impressive sample of images from journals, books, engravings, ceramics and other kinds of decorative arts and household artefacts. The transfers were often accompanied by a shifting of meaning, use, status and value of the respective illustrations. Images could move from the sacred and ascetic to the silly and amusing or the severe and admonitory. The character of the images which originally encompassed rich narratives could become trivial and „decorative“ on their path of trans-mediations. Schmidt highlighted the special role of the Dutch publishers and print ateliers processing knowledge products, amplifying their value and meaning, reformulating and repackaging knowledge products to produce much-in-demand objects for all of Europe.

MAREIKE MENNE (Stuttgart/Paderborn) followed the path of knowledge products a step further and spoke about the reception of objects and personal experiences connected to China, which were transported through the Netherlands, to Westphalia. Like Benjamin Schmidt she did not look at the transformation of intellectual knowledge but at the transformation of common knowledge. In the context of her research project she intends to study the language skills, the knowl-

edge about the chains of acquisition and distribution of artefacts and the know-how about the use of foreign foodstuffs and medicine of the so-called „Hollandgeher,“ seasonal workers from Westphalia going to Holland, in the 18th century. Up to now Menne found about 5,000 people progressing from there to the overseas territories with the Dutch East India Company (VOC), mainly as sailors and soldiers, of whom, however, only about 30 per cent returned home. Some of the „Hollandgeher“ brought with them tiles and clock-works as well as exotic products when they went back to Westphalia. The consumption of colonial products was not confined to the upper classes, although exotica were part of the everyday life of nobles as well as wealthy merchants and had become an integral part of their interior decoration and dietary habits. According to Menne, the reception of Chinese forms of knowledge helped the mixing of noble and bourgeois types of culture, tastes and habits. Most of the exotic products and knowledge which entered Europe through Amsterdam, however, were not brought to Westphalia directly, but took the way via the river Weser or the commercial city of Hamburg. Menne argued that European expansion led to a deepening of the transmission networks within Europe and that therefore the reactions to news, knowledge and material culture from China are also to be understood as effects of the transfers within Europe. As a result of this process new objects and traditions were created to be used in everyday life, which integrated all kinds of foreign and indigenous elements. The tile stove, for example, was a combination of components from the Netherlands, China, Westphalia, France and the Ottoman Empire.

In contrast to Schmidt and Menne, LISSA ROBERTS (Enschede) concentrated on knowledge transformation in the extra-European world, namely in the port city of Nagasaki and the island of Dejima situated in its harbour, where employees of the Dutch East Indies Company were restrictedly housed between the 1630s and 1850s. Roberts drew attention to the fact that fundamentals such as time, space and weight had to be negotiated and managed on a local level, so that other exchanges could be successfully

pursued. Dutch and Japanese timekeeping systems and calendars were different as the lengths of hours in the Japanese system were tied to the season. When the Europeans introduced mechanical clocks to Japan, the Japanese found a way to adapt them to their own ‘natural’ system, while the Europeans used almanacs as time management tools, which they tried to calibrate according to the Japanese system. This wasn’t always possible, however, because the Dutch went for several years without receiving new almanacs from Batavia or Europe. Regarding space, maps played a central role in issues of governance between Japan and the VOC. In their usage of maps, Edo officials sought to safeguard their control by managing the flow of geographical knowledge as a uni-directional activity, while the VOC officials saw maps as both mundane repositories of geographical knowledge and as media of commercial and cultural exchange. Third, many commodities, including copper, were sold by weight, which raised the question of which systems, measures and processes of weighting were acceptable to both parties. The VOC representatives and their Japanese counterparts negotiated problems involving measurement standards, techniques and precision in many recorded cases. They can be interpreted as struggles to manage the exchange process for purposes of oversight, control and increased profits. Roberts made a point that gifts of knowledge, whether embodied in advice, books, pictures or models, reflected on the Dutch as valuable and trustworthy trading partners, who showed themselves willing to generously share and whose knowledge and skills could be harnessed for Japanese advantage. Of course, the Dutch often did this quite calculatedly. As the VOC officials were especially interested in the Japanese copper production, they were keen on encouraging the productivity of the Japanese mines. Rather than support a bid for knowledge and skill-based independence, their sharing of knowledge was used to match their own economic, political and strategic interests.

ANJANA SINGH (London) focussed on knowledge transformation on the South-West coast of India, namely in Cochin. Her major question was why knowledge diffused in

the ways it did, and why a centralization of knowledge took place in European cities only, although the infrastructure needed for diffusion and centralization would have been available in Southern Asia, too. She focussed her exploration on the „Hortus Malabaricus“, a description and illustration of the flora of Malabar which was compiled and published in a 12 volume edition in Amsterdam between 1678 and 1703 under the leadership of Hendrik Adriaan van Reede tot Drakestein. Van Reede had served as a commander of the VOC between 1669 and 1677 and during this time had used all the accessible resources to get information about the plants of Malabar. He asked for the oral traditions of the population in Cochin, of medics and lay persons, commoners and elites, and sent messages to princes and others to bring him plants of different regions of Malabar and the Konkan Coast. Men in Malabar, who spoke Portuguese and Malayalam, Konkani and Dutch and those with knowledge of Latin and Arabic were gathered and through a complex system of transliteration and translation, the information was written down. As Singh explained, the local information was thus transformed into „provisional universalized truths“, and when the volumes were published in Amsterdam in Latin, they became „credible universal knowledge“. However, the locals did not get the end product, i.e. the printed book which had within its pages, however flawed, generations of encapsulated knowledge. Singh is trying to find out why there was so little impetus to have the Hortus published in Cochin, or attempts made to translate it into Malayalam, and why the Raja of Cochin did not want a copy for himself or for the local healers. Singh wants to know why the „informers“ did not get the „knowledge“, i.e. why the Europeans benefited from the exchange and the locals did not. She believes, from work done on the life of Van Reede, that Van Reede's motives for the compilation of the Hortus might initially have been his personal curiosity, a social motivation, because it was supposed to be „noble“ to bring learned information back home from one's travels, and also an economic motivation to enquire if something profitable could be discovered from the riches of Malabar. She

concluded with asking if and why such social and economic motivation was apparently missing in Malabar.

Singh and some other speakers made a clear distinction between information and knowledge. In many papers of the conference, however, these terms were used quite indiscriminately. More often than not, knowledge was not understood as the ability to wield and apply information, but used as a synonym for information. Knowledge transformation, therefore, was not analysed as the generation, transfer and integration of skills, but was simply related to the transportation, trans-mediation and alteration of information. Singh also brought back into mind that the process of knowledge transfer was not a balanced one and that the exchange was unequal. Although information spread into many directions during the Dutch expansion and assumed all kinds of embodiments, being altered, enlarged, depleted, adjusted, or hybridized, it was neither necessarily transformed into scientifically, economically or strategically useful knowledge, nor did it become universal. The logic of transfer, transformation and diffusion of information as well as its ways of conversion into knowledge are still far away from being deciphered by the historians. Therefore the questions posed in the introduction still remain to be answered. The conference gave an insight into the state of the art by looking at a couple of examples taken from the Dutch Expansion. It was a pity, however, that not all speakers were informed to make their presentation in English, thus excluding a considerable fraction of the participants from actually sharing their knowledge.

Conference Overview:

Susanne Friedrich (München): Einführung/Introduction

Benjamin Schmidt (Seattle/Princeton): Knowledge Products: Dutch Exotic Geography circa 1700

Surekha Davies (London): Illustrated Dutch Maps and the Shaping of Knowledge about Human Diversity, 1598-1645

Anke Fischer-Kattner (München): Transformationen und Transformativität von Wissen.

François Le Vaillants Reiseberichte aus der niederländischen Kapkolonie

Simona Valeriani (London): Useful Knowledge in the Encyclopaedic Tradition between Europe, China and Japan

Mareike Menne (Stuttgart/Paderborn): Ein Geschmack nach Fremde, Tee und Tod, oder: Wie Westfalen die niederländische Expansion erfuhren

Barend Noordam (Heidelberg): Military Intelligence Gathering and Dissemination: the Case of the Dutch VOC in the Chinese Strategic Context of the 17th Century

Lissa Roberts (Enschede): Dejima as a Center of Accumulation and Mediation between the VOC and Japan

Bettina Noak (Berlin): Im Banne der Curiositas. Wouter Schouten (1638-1704) als Ethnologe und Naturwissenschaftler

Anjana Singh (London): The Hortus Malabaricus: Hendrik Adriaan van Reede tot Drakestein's Encyclopaedia on the Flora of the Malabar Coast (12 Volumes, 1678-1703).

Stefan Ehrenpreis (München): Knowledge of Brazil and its Representations in the 17th Century Netherlands and Germany

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